DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 031 CS 210 337

AUTHOR Jeremiah, Milford A.
TITLE Using Television News and Documentaries for Writing Instruction.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Documentaries; English Instruction; Instructional Materials; Interdisciplinary Approach; Learning Strategies; Material Development; *Models; *News Media; Postsecondary Education; Secondary Education; Teacher Developed Materials; *Teaching Methods; *Television; Writing Evaluation; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Instructional Models

ABSTRACT

Secondary and postsecondary students can be taught writing skills using a step-by-step examination of a television news or documentary program that can be undertaken in a single class period. The procedure consists of a series of strategies to facilitate the instructional process, as follows: (1) as a warm-up mechanism, the teacher introduces the writing skill (i.e., information or persuasion) on an overhead projector; (2) students are allowed time for questions and comments; (3) the news segment is presented; (4) students produce an outline from the news stimulus; (5) outlines are then assessed for organization; (6) the outlines are collected to minimize any external influences; and (7) students produce a full length essay at the next class period, after receiving their outlines. Topics should include an introduction, adequate support, and argumentation. Provision should be made for revision, and both formal (e.g., progressive scales) and informal mechanisms can be used for evaluating these writing activities. Since the structure and content of television news and documentary presentations seem to mirror the practice of essay writing instruction, the incorporation of such programs may be a productive avenue of writing instruction. (NKA)

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Using Television News and Documentaries For Writing Instruction

Milford A. Jeremiah, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Box 353

Morgan State University

Cold Spring Lane and Hillen Road

Baltimore, Maryland 21239

(301) 889-4697 (Home)

(301) 444-3165 (Work)

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Using Television News and Documentaries For Writing Instruction

One of the demands of classroom instruction is to devise novel and creative instructional strategies. Sometimes, as teachers, we wonder if all possible teaching strategies have been utilized or presented in any one of the numerous journals in press today. Even if these positions are speculative, one may consider the possibility of incorporating previously assigned techniques with a novel procedure.

The area of television news and documentaries, in my opinion, is one avenue that could be utilized for writing skills instruction, especially composition tasks.

A brief review of the literature reveals that educators have devised instructional strategies with television programming. These strategies cover a broad range of grade levels, issues and disciplines. Ridley-Johnson (1983) in a study of grades five through eight, confirm other research findings showing small negative relations among television viewing, achievement, and the intelligence quotient.

Stroman (1986) reported that in a study of youth ages 7-13, the amount of time spent watching television was related positively to the self concepts of girls and unrelated to the boys' self concept.

Kill and King (1983) investigated strategies by which health instruction could use the medium of television to deliver information and persuasive messages.

Diverse in their aims as these studies are, one can see the possible benefits of using television programs for academic purposes.

The research on television as a specific tool for writing instruction has been documented elsewhere. For example, Carroll (1985) explained how television could be used to help students understand the principles of research paper writing. Liberman (1983) discussed the results of an examination of the script used in eight television programs popular with teenagers that indicate that viewers are exposed to short, simple sentences and largely unsophisticated language structures.

This paper is not designed to test hypotheses within an experimental model of investigation. Rather, it presents an instructional model for using television news and documentaries for writing instruction. The model is presented within the dimensions of rationale, design, and evaluation of such a program.

Before proceeding with the model, it is fitting that we present a scheme of television news and documentaries. To do so, we believe, would present an image between the outward structural design and the inner or cognitive representa-

tion of these events.

Figure 1

General
Topic Overview

Introduction
and Focus

Evidence

Conclusion

Having looked at several television news accounts and documentaries (see Appendix A & B), there is a certain structure to their presentation. Figure 1 is an attempt to capture this structure. First, the anchors (McNeil-Lehrer) or hosts (20/20) introduce the programming within a general framework, a type of "big picture" or overview of the topic. Second, the overview is confined to the dimensions of an introductory paragraph from which a thesis may be explicitly/

implicitly stated. Third, evidence by way of examples, anecdotes, facts, statistics, and expert testimony are presented. Fourth, there is usually a summary statement at the end of the presentation.

Rationale

Why use television news and documentaries in writing instruction? First, experiential and observational data suggest that students are more visually and auditorily oriented today than was the case a few years ago. Second, in many school systems, instructors have access to a variety of educational media and technology (e.g., video cassette recorders, monitors, microcomputers). The availability of these materials would facilitate an instructional program as the one advocated in this paper. Third, the use of television materials as advocated here would allow for skills integration (i.e., listening, speaking, and thinking) in the writing process. Fourth, this instructional model would help to create for students a link between the world of television and the written word. This would be especially valuable to younger students and "reluctant writers" of any age who often fail to understand that all of their favorite television programs begin with "the written work." The underlying message is: Even in today's "video world," one must become proficient in the use of the written language.

[5]

Instructional Design

Subjects

In this program, we are directing our efforts at students in the secondary and postsecondary levels. Since these students usually vary in writing ability - as determined by formal and informal assessment instruments - it may be instructive to obtain some baseline performance data prior to beginning the instructive design under discussion. This procedure would allow the teacher to obtain postperformance data even if a true experimental design is not proposed here.

In addition, students with whom this model is used should be rather sophisticated writers who are able to produce an outline from the video tape (without first taking notes which must then be organized in outline form).

A methodology which might be implemented could include the following dimensions.

News Selection

In selecting news accounts for this exercise, certain guidelines should be followed if maximum benefits are to accrue from these efforts. First, the news and/or documentaries should be of a five- to fifteen-minute duration. The news should also address one item or issue. Second, the news item should focus on either information or persuasion of the major content factor

for the listeners. These writing styles are the ones most frequently used in writing skill assessment at these educational levels and their inclusion here seems most appropriate.

Materials

A taped copy of the news or documentary and a television monitor comprise the chief materials. The instructor, as an added factor, may also audio tape the stimulus material. An audio taped variety could possibly be used for comparative purposes with the audio taped variety.

Procedure

The procedure here consists of a series of steps to facilitate the instructional process.

Step 1. As a warm-up mechanism, the teacher should introduce the writing skill (i.e. information or persuasion) on an overhead projector. Topics should include an introductory paragraph, adequate support, and argumentation. These units should be the instructional objective under this step. (10-12 minutes);

Step 2. Allow students time for questions and comments. (7-10 minutes);

Step 3. Present news segment for its entire duration. (12-15 minutes);

Step 4. Ask students to produce an outline from the news stimulus. (15-20 minutes);

Step 5. Assess for organization of outline. This could be either peer or teacher reviewed;

Step 6. Collect the outlines in order to minimize any external influences should students take the outlines with them.

Step 7. Ask students to produce a full length essay at the next class period, after receiving their outlines.

Of course, provision should be made for revision of the writing samples.

Evaluation

Both formal and informal mechanisms for evaluating these writing activities should be established. Formal mechanisms could utilize progressive scales (e.g., 2, 3, 5, 6, 7) or the presence or absence of units (thesis, body, audience, style) with consensus grading involving two or three impartial evaluators.

Informal mechamisms could focus on an overall representation of the stimulus or within some minnally defined domain of overall message presented without resorting to other elements of writing (i.e. grammar, logic, argumentation).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to show that television news and documentaries can be used as techniques for writing, instruction, specifically full length essays. Since the structure and content of these presentations seem to mirror the practice of essay writing instruction, the incorporation of such programs may be productive avenues of writing instruction.

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Appendix A

Excerpt from The McNeil-Lehrer News Hour (2/6/87)

Introduction

New rules to cut down smoking went into effect today. We have a report from reporter -- at Walrick, Wisconsin.

Body

Speaker: Dr. _____ head of pulmonary medicine at the University of Wisconsin.

Speaker: Director of the ACLU

Speaker: Testimony by several plant workers

Conclusion

(Next we turn to the Trade Wars....)

Appendix B

From 20/20 2/ 16/87

Introduction

We now turn to a very difficult subject: Sex, AIDS. Medical expert reports now that sex can kill you. What is it? Who needs to practice it? We all need to know.

Body

Segments from movie on AIDS

Several Drs. - give expert testimony

- Several anecdotes are cited
- Experts from Center for Disease Coantrol
- Groups that oppose condom use

Conclusion

If you must sleep with more than one partner, who should wear a condom?